

“Unmute Me” – Charlene Blackledge, May 2017

"Unmute Me" is a series of seven abstract mixed media paintings invoking the mindset of disability art, wherein an artist shares experiences with their disability through art. It expresses a few of my mental disability experiences, with an emphasis on ADHD. Often, myths and stigmas obfuscate the reality of my disability so people don't *really* understand what it's like. This series works to counter that invisibility by removing the "mute button" on my perspective and expressing my truth.

This is a very personal series that fits into the larger disability art movement with how it emphasizes communication to reduce stigma around disability. The style is reminiscent of Abstract Expressionism and draws some inspiration from Keith Haring's faceless figures and focus on nonverbal communication.

The paintings are all attached to the wall in such a way as to communicate organic fluidity, in reference to the organic nature of the brain. Each highlights a red human figure that is deliberately featureless to deflect any automatic judgements and to allow the plain message to shine through. Beyond the figure, there is a lack of clear patterns among the pieces, reflecting the disorganized and fast-switching pace of my thoughts. Yet all the figures produce a line that the eye follows between the works, suggesting an order within the apparent chaos. The paintings start at the topmost left corner, follow a loop downward to the far right, and then upward to the first piece again.

1.) The first piece provides an introduction to the series, showing words I face both directly and indirectly that invalidate my feelings and struggles. But at the click of the "mute" icon, suddenly there is a rainbow of more true experiences that come with my brain.

2.) The next piece is representative of how my mental process suddenly shifts depending on if people are around or not. When surrounded by others, the chaos is kept in check inside the figure's head. When alone, however, all

the distractions, impulsive behavior, and other mental processes are let loose in a whirlwind of "not focused."

3.) The next shows my unique experiences in managing mental illnesses. I have ample energy and restlessness that makes it much easier for me to fight the fatigue and slowness of depression, seen in the buff arm of the figure pulling away from the darkness. Yet, every failure I encounter also seems to strengthen my anxiety and sharpen it, as seen in the wimpier arm unable to keep back the stabbing orange spikes.

4.) Then the figure faces a misleading mirror which is suggesting that the figure is broken, representative of the stigmas and myths so common for disabilities. The figure has a blinder on, showing how easy it is to believe such inaccuracies and how hard it is to see the positive truth and wellness that is so close. The mirror is being pointed at by other, similarly blinded people. This overall lack of understanding is what kept me from diagnosis until adulthood.

5.) The figure conveys the predicament associated with my brain's distractibility and obsessions. The figure carries an incredibly heavy load, facing a discouraging sign on the tree, and yet still stoops to pick a flower. This could be bad because the stress of the load can be harmful, but also could be completely worth it, as there is treasure lying hidden in the flowers' roots.

6.) Here is one of the greatest advantages of ADHD: Easy brainstorming. I once heard an apt comparison about ideas coming like popcorn, which inspired this image. The popcorn contains images suggesting the concept of an idea (lightbulb, screw) or the sorts of things I get lots of ideas for (videos, speaking, writing, etc.). One popcorn image contains a map, representing the many ideas I get regarding figuring out my path in life.

7.) Last is a call to a few general, invisible struggles with my disability, which are deliberately hard to identify but have short descriptions if closely examined. In the

foreground, the distractingly bright figure holds a mask, emphasizing how I hide the parts of me I'm not proud of and shift others' attention elsewhere.

Overall, this is a very personal painting series designed to communicate aspects of my disability experience that are harder to put into words. Mental disability, and especially ADHD, is a complex and multifaceted experience neither wholly positive nor negative. These paintings are focused on communication and removing silence so that I may share *my* reality, and not passively allow an imaginary reality of my disability experience to persist.